The Wisdom of Egypt

Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuizen

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PAUL'S RAPTURE TO PARADISE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

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Our knowledge of early Christianity sometimes depends on fortuitous scraps of information. In 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 Paul commits several interesting confidences to paper, which would have remained unknown had he not been so terribly provoked by some itinerant evangelists who were active in the Corinthian church. Reluctantly, as it seems, he tells of visions and revelations (ἐπιθυμία καὶ ἐποικιάζεις), since apparently his adversaries had boasted of their own ecstatic experiences and had accused Paul of being deficient in this respect. First, Paul tells about a man in Christ—i.e., Paul himself—who had been caught up (ἀποφάγη) to the third heaven and to paradise, where he had heard ineffable words (᾿αρετὴν ῥήματα) that man may not declare. He dates this experience fourteen years ago, which goes back to a fairly unknown period of his life, in the beginning of the forties of the first century CE. He professes not to know if he remained in his body in this experience, nor does he explain if his rapture to the third heaven is identical with his rapture to paradise, nor what exactly is his cosmology: did he assume that the third heaven was the highest one, or was it one of seven, or more? Was paradise in the third heaven or elsewhere? In spite of these and other questions that he leaves unanswered, Paul makes it clear to the Corinthian Christians that he is not wholly uninitiated into this type of mystical experiences. Next, he continues with another confidence that seems closely related to his rapture to heaven and to paradise. He tells about a thorn in his flesh, an angel of Satan who harasses him, in order to save him from being too elated (2 Cor 12.7). Thirdly, he testifies to the Lord's answer to his threefold prayer that his tormentor leave him; the answer was, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12.9).

1 Since it seems most likely that Paul speaks of one rapture and not of two, we will use the singular 'rapture' and not the plural.
It is true that in his other epistles Paul does sometimes refer to visions and revelations, so that his confidences in 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 do not come as a bolt from the blue. He says that he has seen Jesus and that Christ appeared to him (1 Cor 9.1; 15.8). He claims that he did not receive the gospel from man, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1.12). When after a long period he went again to Jerusalem (coincidently fourteen years after his former visit), he went there according to a revelation (κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν; Gal 2.1-2). Once he mentions in passing the possibility of being 'beside ourselves' (ἐν τῇ γένεσιν ...; 2 Cor 5.13), by which he most likely alludes to his ecstatic experiences.2

Yet in these short references Paul neither informs us about his rapture to the third heaven and to paradise nor about his struggle with Satan's messenger and the Lord's answer to his prayer. We may be grateful to Paul's adversaries for having provoked him to such an extent that he threw off his usual reticence about the revelations he received and that he raised a corner of the veil, for these confidences give us a deeper insight into Paul's biography. Moreover, the book of Acts confirms that Paul regularly had visions, but historically speaking these testimonies are less reliable, since the author might have piously attributed these experiences to his spiritual hero.3

The pericope of 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 has been studied from many angles. To mention only some publications from the last decades: Alan F. Segal and C.R.A. Murray-Jones associated Paul's rapture with Jewish merkabah mysticism,4 but Peter Schafer denied this connection.5 James D. Tabor collected testimonies to similar journeys to heaven from the Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures, and Bernard Heineinger wrote an interesting book on 'Paul the Visionary.'6 Recently, J.R. Harrison analysed the two 'Apocalypses of Paul' that

were inspired by Paul's remarks on his heavenly journey.7

The present paper pursues the investigation how Paul's notice on his rapture to heaven and to paradise was received and imitated in early Christianity, both 'Catholic' and 'Gnostic.' We will not only examine some literary references and comments, but we will also investigate if Paul's testimony to this tradition according to which one could be caught up to heaven has been used as proof of the legitimacy of similar experiences. Besides analysing these references to Paul's rapture, we will also briefly evaluate them and go into the hermeneutical question how far they can be considered faithful to Paul's intention to be reticent about his ecstatic or mystical experiences. This implies that, in our opinion, Paul's reluctance to share such experiences is sincere and not only a rhetorical device. As far as the dating of the sources and their authors can be established, they will be presented more or less in a chronological order.

The 'Gnostic' Apocalypse of Paul

The fifth Nag Hammadi Codex contains an Apocalypse of Paul that is apparently inspired by the apostle's confidences in 2 Corinthians 12.1-4, although it does not explicitly quote this text. The Apocalypse may have been written in the second century.8 In the Coptic manuscript several lines and words are lacking, but in general the plot has been well preserved.

The Apocalypse tells that, when Paul stood on 'the mountain of Jericho', he met a little child, i.e. the risen Christ who is also the Holy Spirit, who exorted him to let his mind awaken and to know the hidden things (μυστηρία) in those that are visible. He told Paul to go to Jerusalem, to his fellow apostles (cf. Gal 1.18; 2.1-10), who are called 'elect spirits'. Then Paul saw them greeting him (18.3-22; 19.10-20). Without any transition, we read that 'the Holy [Spirit] who was

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2 R.P. Martin, 2 Corinthians: (Word Biblical Commentary 40), Waco, Texas 1986, 126-7
3 Acts 9.3-6; 16.9; 19.9-10; 22.6-10; 22.17-21; 23.11; 26.12-18; 27.22
8 Nag Hammadi Codex V.2; edition and introduction by W.R. Murdock and G.W. MacRae, 'The Apocalypse of Paul', in D.M. Parrott (ed.), Nag Hammadi Codices F.2-5 and F.7 with Papysrus Berossioliou 6932, 1 and 4 (Nag Hammati Studies 11), Leiden 1979, 47-63.
speaking with [him] caught him up (ἦλθεν εἰς ἄνωθεν) on high to the third heaven, and he passed beyond to the fourth [heaven] (19.20-25). Apart from the title, ‘Apocalypse of Paul’, this is in fact all that reminds us of the wording of 2 Corinthians 12.1-4.

Next, the Holy Spirit told Paul to look at his likeness upon the earth. This probably means that he was asked to look at his own body, for it is told that when Paul gazed down he saw those who were upon the earth and the twelve apostles at his right hand and at his left (19.26-20.4); this implies that he also saw himself, i.e. his body. The uncertainly of 2 Corinthians 12.2-3, ‘whether in the body or out of the body I do not know’, is thus subtly removed in this Apocalypse. Its implicit message is that Paul was caught up without his physical body.  

In the fourth heaven Paul saw angels whipping a soul. Because of its sins committed in the body it was cast down to another body (20.5-21.22). Invited by the Spirit and accompanied by the other apostles Paul went up to the fifth heaven, where he saw angels goading the souls on to judgment (21.22-22.10). Via the sixth heaven the Spirit led him up to the seventh heaven, where he met an old man sitting on a throne brighter than the sun. After a short dialogue about Paul’s origin and destination he gave a password and a sign to the old man, who was thus forced to let Paul go up to the eighth heaven (22.11-24.1). There the twelve apostles greeted him. Finally, Paul went up to the ninth and tenth heaven, where he greeted his fellow spirits (24.1-8).  

Compared with Paul’s own words in 2 Corinthians 12.1-4, it is striking that neither paradise nor the ineffable words recur in this Apocalypse, let alone the thorn in the flesh and the angel of Satan mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12.7. Paul’s original confidence about his rapture appears to be used as a pretext for writing an account of the heavenly journey of his soul or spirit, which should serve as a Gnostic model, either of a mystical experience during one’s life, or of the vicissitudes of the soul or spirit after the death of the body. Moreover, an important theme of this Apocalypse appears to be that Paul is depicted on the same level as the twelve apostles.  

Patristic testimonies to Gnostic views

Several Church Fathers testify to Gnostics who related Paul’s rapture with their own knowledge. Hippolytus of Rome’s report on the N ashes, who call themselves γενεαρχοι, informs us that their view of spiritual regeneration, resurrection, and divinization included that one should enter into heaven through a gate. They said that this was the gate of which Paul wrote that ‘he was caught up by an angel and had ascended to the second and third heaven, into paradise, and that he has beheld what he has beheld and has heard ineffable words that man may not declare’. It is remarkable that the N ashes added an angel, the second heaven, and visions to Paul’s own testimony. Hippolytus does not clarify whether they located paradise in the third heaven. However that may be, according to his report the N ashes identified the ineffable words that Paul heard with their own secret mysteries, of which Paul—as they understood it—also wrote in 1 Corinthians 2.13-14, ‘which <also we declare> not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the psychic man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him’. We may conclude that the N ashes’ entrance through the heavenly gate should not be interpreted as an ascent of the soul or spirit after the death of the body, but as a mystical experience after which one was considered initiated into the secret knowledge.

9 Translation: Murdoch andMacRae, ‘Apocalypse’, 53.
10 Harrison, ‘Quest’, 28. Less likely is the initial interpretation of Klauck, ‘Himmelreise’, 169, who suggests that Paul’s likeness upon the earth is ‘wohlläufig die Menschen’. Later on he identifies Paul’s likeness with his body (p. 177).
11 For a broader analysis and interpretation, see Klauck, ‘Himmelreise’, 159-90; Harrison, ‘Quest’, 28-32.
12 Cf. the First Apocalypse of James (Nag Hammadi Codex V.3) 32.28-36.1. Other testimonies of persons ‘caught up’ (ὑπολαμβάνει) occur in the Paraphrase of Sem (Nag Hammadi Codex VII.1) 1.7-16; Alogos (Nag Hammadi Codex XI.3) 58.28-37.
13 If the author understood the description τοῦ προσώπου ἐπιβασαλλομένου in 2 Cor 11.5 and 12.11 as a reference to the twelve apostles, which was a common interpretation among the Church Fathers of the fourth century (e.g. John Chrysostom, Hom. in sevendem epistolam ad Corinthios 23.3; Patrologia Graeca 61, col. 556), then he also confirms Paul’s remark in these verses that he was not inferior to these ‘superlative apostles’.
16 Refutatio 3.8.25.
17 Refutatio 3.8.26. In Marcovich’s edition the words ‘also we declare’ (καί λαλοῦμεν) are added from 1 Cor 2.13.
In his report on Basilides of Alexandria Hippolytus quotes, with a minor change, Paul's words, 'I heard (ἰκανοῦ) ineffable words that man may not declare'. This quotation figures in a detailed report of Basilides' alleged teachings that we shall not fully discuss here. Suffice it to note that, according to Hippolytus, Basilides assumed that once there was an absolute nothing that could not even be called ineffable (ἄρρητος), since it was "above every name that is named" (Eph 1:21). After an elaborate exposition on the creation of the Ogdoad that is ineffable, and the Hebdomad that can be enunciated (ἐπὶ τό), Hippolytus relates the coming of the Light of the Gospel to the Hebdomad, which is the planetary world to which the earth belongs. In this context the report refers to the revelation of 'the mystery that was not made known to previous generations' (Eph 3:4-5), of which it is written, 'by revelation the mystery was made known to me' (Eph 3:3), as well as to the ineffable words that Paul heard. It appears that Basilides, or the Gnostics who appealed to him, pretended to know the contents of these ineffable words and related them to their view of salvation and illumination.

Epiphanius of Salamis confirms that Gnostic circles connected their doctrines with Paul's testimony to his rapture. He informs us that Caius and his colleagues, full of ineffable deeds (ἄρρητορρήγιας ἐπιλεύον), entitled the Ascension of Paul ('Ἀναβοστικὸν Παύλου), which allegedly contained the ineffable words Paul heard in the third heaven.

Irenaeus of Lyons

In Irenaeus' discussion of the Valentinians' beliefs he ridicules their cosmology, according to which the Demiurge reigned over the seven heavens of the Hebdomad, above which there should be the intermediate sphere of the Mother Achemon and the Pleroma. For what profit would Paul have had of his rapture to the third heaven and to paradise, which were supposed to be under the power of the Demiurge, if in fact he should have beheld and heard the mysteries that, according to the Valentinians, are above the Demiurge? But if Paul had not ascended higher than the third heaven, Irenaeus concludes that the Valentinians will not ascend above the seventh heaven, since they are certainly not superior to the apostle.

It has been contended that Irenaeus reacts here to a Valentinian speculation on 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. Yet a careful analysis of Irenaeus' account proves that actually he does not refer to explicit Gnostic speculations on Paul's ascent, but constructs and refutes a hypothetical Gnostic account of Paul's ascension.

Irenaeus shares the common opinion that there are seven heavens. In his account of Paul's ascent he appears to equate the third heaven and paradise. In his view, it was certainly possible that Paul's body was included in the rapture. He maintains that the ineffable words that Paul heard did not come from a psychic Demiurge, but from the Spirit of God. Moreover, it is noteworthy that he shares the Platonic idea that in spite of all the properties one may ascribe to God, God is above all these and therefore ineffable (inerrarrabilis).

26 Irenaeus, Demonstratio Apostolicae Prædications 9 (Sources Chrétiennes 62).
27 Adversus Haereses 2.30.7 (Sources Chrétiennes 294); see the commentary by A. Rousseau and L. Doutrelleau, Sources Chrétiennes 293, pp. 331-2. Cf. also Adversus Haereses 5.5.1 (Sources Chrétiennes 138).
28 Adversus Haereses 2.30.8 (Sources Chrétiennes 294). Rousseau and Doutrelleau, Sources Chrétiennes 293, p. 332, explain Spiritus Dei as an explicative genitive ('le Dieu Esprit'), but since Irenaeus may allude to the Spirit's inexpressible intercessions of Rom 8:26 (τὸ πνεῦμα ἑαυτότιμον στοιχεῖον ἀληθοῦς), it is preferable to translate 'the Spirit of God'.
Tertullian of Carthage

In comparison with Irenaeus, Tertullian reacts more explicitly to the claim of heretics that they knew what had been revealed to Paul when he was caught up. He stresses that it is impossible that what Paul heard in the third heaven and in paradise has changed his teaching, since these revelations were not to be communicated to any human being. He ironically argues that, if a heresy claims to know what these revelations were about, then either Paul had betrayed the secret, or someone else had been caught up to paradise and was permitted to declare what was forbidden to Paul.31

Clement of Alexandria

In a similar vein, Clement of Alexandria criticizes heretical Gnostics who pretended to know ‘what no eye has known, nor has entered into the mind of man’ (cf. 1 Cor 2.9); in Clement’s view, the knowledge from face to face (1 Cor 13.12) will be granted us only after our departure from earthly life. He wonders how Gnostics can pretend to know ‘what no ear has ever heard’ (cf. 1 Cor 2.9), but he is willing to except the ear that was caught up to the third heaven. However, he awkwardly subjoins that this ear was commanded to keep silent.32 Thus Clement excluded the possibility that the heretics knew the ineffable words heard by Paul. These remarks occur in his instruction of newly baptised Christians.

In his miscellaneous essays for advanced Christians Clement points to the consensus of Moses, Plato, and Orpheus, that God is invisible and ineffable.33 In his view this is confirmed by Paul’s testimony to his rapture to the third heaven and ‘from there’ (κωτελθεὶς) to paradise. Clement concludes that one begins to designate the divinity by words only above the third heaven, and that it is the task of ‘those up there’ to initiate the elect souls.34 By ‘those up there’ Clement means the angels above the third heaven whose task it is to instruct the ascending souls.35

In his worldview there are seven heavenly spheres, above which there is the eighth sphere of the fixed stars and the intelligible world.36 Because he includes ‘from there’ in his free quotation of 2 Corinthians 12.2-4, he apparently assumes that paradise is above the third heaven, but he does not locate it more specifically. He may have shared the Valentinian view that paradise was in the fourth heaven.37 Like Irenaeus, Clement agreed with the Platonic view that God himself is ineffable. Unlike the heretic Gnostics he did not pretend to know anything about the revelations grafted to Paul.

Origen of Alexandria

Origen often refers and alludes to Paul’s rapture and to the ineffable words he heard. Once he notes the question why Paul could not say whether his rapture took place in the body or out the body, but he does not go into it.38 In those allusions that contain a location of the revelation imparted to Paul, Origen repeatedly mentions only the third heaven and omits paradise,39 even though he says twice, like Clement, that the apostle ‘was caught up to the third heaven and from there to paradise’, where he heard the ineffable words.40 However, we have this version only in Rufinus’ translation ‘et inde in paradisum’, which may not be completely trustworthy on such details. In his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4.17 Origen explains that Paul heard the ineffable words because he was caught up to the third heaven and not just to heaven.41 In his book On First Principles he surmises that paradise is

31 Tertullian, De Praescriptione Haereticae 24.5.6 (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 1; Sources Chrétienennes 46). The same argument is used by Augustine, Tractatus in Evangelium Iohannis 98.6 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 36).
32 Clement, Stromateis 5.78 (Sources Chrétienennes 278).
33 Clement, Stromateis 5.78 (Sources Chrétienennes 278).
34 Stromateis 5.79.1.
35 Thus A. Le Boulluec, Sources Chretiennes 279, p. 239.
36 Stromateis 4.159.2; 5.106.2-4; 7.57.5 (Sources Chretiennes 463; 278; 428).
37 Clement, Excerpta e Thelostete 51.1 (Sources Chretiennes 23); cf. Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses 1.3.2 (Sources Chretiennes 264).
38 Origen, Contra Caelum 1.48 (Sources Chretiennes 132).
39 Origen, De Oratatione 1 (Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller 3); Hom. in Joas 23.4 (Sources Chretiennes 71); Hom. in Psalmos 38.18 (Sources Chretiennes 411); Contra Caelum 1.48 (Sources Chretiennes 132); Philoactis 15.19 (Sources Chretiennes 302). Of these texts, De Oratatione, Contra Caelum, and Philoactis have been preserved in Greek.
40 Origen, Comm. in Canticum 1.5.6 (Sources Chretiennes 375); Comm. in Romanos 10.43 (Aus der Geschichte der Lateinischen Bibel 34).
41 Origen, Comm. in Thessalonicenses III; in Jerome, Epistula 119.10 (ed. Labort VI, p. 117).
a place on the earth located in heaven, where the souls of deceased saints go after death, in order to receive instruction before they ascend to the higher heavenly spheres. Elsewhere in this book he deals with 'some people' who referred to a book of Baruch that says (in a text unknown to us) that there are seven heavens. They assumed that the sphere of the fixed stars above the seven heavens is the heaven promised to God's people. For his own view Origen refers to his early Commentary on Genesis 1.1, but this is lost. In his apology Against Celsus he notes that the Scriptures accepted in the churches of God do not declare that there are seven heavens or any other definite number of them, but only speak of 'heavens'. It may be concluded that Origen does not attach much value to the question where exactly Paul heard the secret words.

In a fragment from Origen's Commentary on Genesis that has been preserved (on Gen 1.14), he says with regard to astrology that 'our wise men' are taught the unutterable things (τὰ ἄτοπρα) by the Spirit of God. He then quotes Paul, 'I heard ineffable words that man may not declare', and explains that Origen seems well aware that the ineffable words revealed to Paul might not be declared, he says in a sermon on the promised land as mapped in the book of Joshua that Paul shared the secret knowledge revealed to him with his intimate collaborators like Timothy and Luke. He explains that the ineffable words might not be declared to men (hominibus) and interprets this as carnal men, referring to Paul's reproach, 'are you not men and do you not walk according to man?' (cf. 1 Cor 3.3-4). Origen even knows that the ineffable words deal with heavenly Jerusalem, Zion, Bethlehem, Hebron, and so on. In his view, Paul reminds Timothy of these ineffable words, saying 'remember the words that you have heard from me, and entrust them to faithful men who are able to teach others also' (cf. 2 Tim 2.2, 8). In his Commentary on Canticles Origen supposes that the secrets Paul heard were encouragements to make progress and to persevere, in order to be able to enter the King's chamber (Cant 1.4). In general Origen assumes that there was a secret, unwritten knowledge, which the Scriptures do not explicitly teach even though they refer to it, and which is known to advanced Christians.

As for God's ineffability, Celsus pretended to uphold the Platonic view that God is ineffable (ἀόρατος) and unnameable (ἀώρωπος), but Origen reacts that Plato said that God cannot be declared to all, which implies that Plato considered God ἄρωπος for a few. Origen basically agrees with Celsus that God is ineffable, and even adds that there are also other ineffable beings inferior to God, for which he points to Paul's plural ἄρωπα ἰδωματα. Yet Origen also maintains that in spite of God's ineffability, he revealed himself in his incarnate Son and Word.

As far as we know, Origen did not criticize any heretical interpretation of Paul's rapture. From a formal point of view, his opinion that Paul transmitted the ineffable words to his fellow workers, and his recognition of a secret, unwritten doctrine, are close to the Gnostic presumption to know Paul's secret teaching. However, Origen would not agree with the contents of the Gnostic knowledge.

\[ \text{Mani} \]

So far, Hippolytus' account of the Naassenes was the only testimony in which Paul's rapture was referred to as an example to be imitated. The first book that first-hand defends the legitimacy of heavenly visions with reference to Paul's rapture is the Mani Codex. This tiny booklet
has probably been translated from Aramaic into Greek in Egypt in the mid-fourth century CE, and contains most valuable information about Mani’s life. It may originally have been compiled in the beginning of the fourth century, but it unmistakably contains older parts. It testifies that Mani had experienced a rapture in which his personal angel (σώματος) ‘revealed to me mysteries that are hidden to the world and that no man may either see or hear’. In the damaged manuscript he is quoted thus: ‘he revealed to me the truest and unutterable (ἀπορρήτως) [teachings]’, and as speaking of ‘height and depth, rest and punishment’, which seems to be part of the contents of the revelation. In order to justify Mani’s rapture and revelations, the author of this part—probably Mani’s disciple Baraia, from the third century—quotes the apocalypses of Adam, Seth, Enos, Sem, and Enoch, all of which testify to the raptures and revelations granted to the respective patriarchs. Finally he refers to Paul and quotes an abbreviated version of 2 Corinthians 12.1-5, from which he omits the third heaven (60.30-61.14). As a further proof that, like Mani, Paul too had received revelations, Galatians 1.11-12 is quoted freely, ‘I show you, brothers, the Gospel that I preached to you, that I did not receive it from man, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (61.15-22). Then the author mentions Paul’s rapture to the third heaven and to paradise; the damaged manuscript may originally have read that Paul was caught up (ὤσ εὐκρίνος ἐκ τῶν θεών), which means that he was out of the body. The author affirms that the apostle wrote in riddles (αἰνιγματικῶς, cf. 1 Cor 13.12) about his rapture and apostleship to those who were initiated with him into the secrets (ἀπόκρυφα) (61.22-62.9).

After these references to authoritative texts, a letter of Mani to his disciples in Edessa is quoted, in which he testifies to his divine vocation and to the ineffable things (ἀπορρήτως) revealed to him. These secrets dealt with the heavenly Father, Mani’s pre-existence, and the foundation of good and evil works (64.8-65.18). According to a quotation from Mani’s Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) he wrote that he had hidden these secrets from sects and pagans, but revealed them to his disciples.

This Codex shows that Mani’s first disciples appealed to Paul’s rapture as a proof of the legitimacy of their master’s experience of rapture and revelation. Most probably this appeal originates from Mani himself. It should be noted that neither the precise location of the third heaven or paradise is considered important, nor does Mani claim to know the ineffable words that were revealed to Paul. Furthermore, it seems that in Manicheism Mani’s rapture remained a isolated phenomenon, since we do not know about similar experiences among his adherents. Apparently, it was considered sufficient that Mani had received a revelation about the new religion he was prompted to found.

The ‘Catholic’ Apocalypse of Paul

Apart from the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul discovered in Nag Hammadi, there is another Apocalypse of Paul that was popular among Catholic Christians. It was originally written in Greek in Egypt, and was translated into many languages. This Apocalypse is often dated to the first half of the third century, because Origen seems to allude to it and Gregory Barhebraeus affirms that Origen accepts it as canonical. But since Origen’s alleged allusion is no proof that he knew precisely this Apocalypse, and Gregory Barhebraeus lived ten centuries after Origen so that his information about him might be untrustworthy, it

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53 Mani Codex 43.4-7; other references to Mani’s rapture in 46.4-5; 47.13-48.14; 63.13-15; 70.10-17.
54 Mani Codex 35.21-36.2; 43.1-4.
55 Mani Codex 48.16-66.12; again in 71.1-72.7.
56 Mani Codex 68.6-15. Moreover, in Mani Codex 126-134 Mani tells that he was lifted up to ‘unutterable places’ (ἐν ἄγγελοις τούτοις). Unfortunately the manuscript is severely damaged here, but it can be understood that he saw a beautiful landscape, where he met a man fully covered with hair and a king and his rulers to whom he proclaimed his message.
58 Gregory Barhebraeus, Nomocanon 7.5: Origen accepted ‘the Apocalypse of Paul together with the other apocalypses’ (ed. P. Bedjan, p. 105, 1.1-2). The plural ‘apocalypses’ shows that Gregory’s information is to be distrusted, since Origen did not accept any other apocalypse than the Apocalypse of John. See R. Roukema, ‘La tradition apostolique et le canon du Nouveau Testament’, in: A. Hilhorst (ed.), The Apostolic Age in Patristic Thought (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 70), Leiden 2004, 86-103 (101-2). I thank Dr Floris Sempeijer for his help in interpreting Gregory’s text.
59 Origen, Hom. in Psalm 36.5.7 [Sources Christianes 411], is supposed to draw on Apocalypse Pauli 13-16.
is not sure whether this dating of the *Apocalypse of Paul* is correct. At least for the origin of the versions that are now at our disposal a dating around 400 seems more appropriate. We will use the long Latin version, since the Greek manuscripts available to us contain only an abridged text. In the incomplete Coptic text Paul’s heavenly journey is more elaborated, whereas the Syriac version, as far as published, is less elaborated. The *Apocalypse* tells that Paul was bodily caught up to the third heaven, where the Lord ordered him to warn the Christians not to sin anymore. Next, an angel leads him through ‘heaven’, where he sees the firmament, the powers that sojourn there, and the souls of the righteous and the sinners (11). Then the angel leads him again to the third heaven, where he enters paradise and meets Enoch and Elijah. The angel commands him not to reveal to anybody on earth the words that he is going to hear at that moment. Consistently, these words are only referred to and not included. However, the angel says that Paul must divulge the other things he will see. Together they descend through the second heaven to the firmament and travel over the gates of heaven. Here Paul sees the promised land, where the souls of the righteous remain temporarily (19-21). Of the detailed description of this lower part of heaven and of the city of Christ we only note the angel’s announcement that David will sing psalms before Christ and the Father in the seventh heaven (29). After a journey out of heaven through the places of torment of the souls of wicked people (31-44), Paul is again led to paradise, where he meets the Virgin Mary and many Old Testament saints (45-51). In these sections there is no mention of the third heaven. Then the *Apocalypse* ends abruptly in the Latin and Greek versions. According to the Coptic manuscript Paul is finally led to the Mount of Olives, where he finds the apostles, who command Mark and Timothy to write down all that Paul has seen. Then Christ appears and commands that this *Apocalypse* should be preached throughout the world. The Syriac version tells that Paul wrote this book and hid it in Tarsus, where it was found again in the time of Theodosius. The same story of the discovery of the *Apocalypse* figures in the beginning of one Latin and of the Greek manuscripts. It would take us too far to go into the long descriptions of what Paul sees on the several levels in heaven and in the places of torment. It is clear that his short notice in 2 Corinthians 12.1-4 is used as a pretext to ascribe popular Catholic views of the hereafter to the authority of the apostle. The texts as we have them give the impression that the author hardly had a precise cosmology, but felt obliged to integrate Paul’s reference to the third heaven in his ideas about the post-mortem abodes of the righteous and the wicked souls. It may be observed that according to this *Apocalypse* Paul’s rapture took place in his body, that paradise is located in the third heaven, and that the seventh heaven was considered the highest one. The apparent contradiction between Paul’s own silence about the ineffable words and the abundant descriptions in this *Apocalypse* is solved by applying these words to a special message that remains secret.

Conclusions

We might pursue our investigation with Didymus of Alexandria’s detailed comments on 2 Corinthians 12.1-5, with the interpretations of non-Egyptian authors like Methodius, who considered paradise a real place on earth and not in heaven, and with the frequent references to the ineffable words in apophatic theology, but this would take up too much room and will therefore have to wait for another occasion. Our conclusions from the texts presented in this paper are as follows.

Only some authors solve Paul’s ambiguity as to whether his rapture

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64 *Apocryphus Pauli* 3: in [cor]pore, cf. 46; in corpore ..., in carne.
took place in or out of the body. Irenaeus deemed it possible that Paul’s body was part of the experience. The Gnostic Apocalypse suggests that the apostle ascended without his body, whereas its Catholic counterpart says that he was lifted up in his body. This difference corresponds with the more negative appreciation of man’s physical body in Gnosticism and with the more positive view of the body as part of God’s creation in Catholic Christianity. The Mani Codex also seems to read that Paul was caught up without his body. Origen only notes Paul’s own ambiguity without explaining it. Probably he would have said that Paul was caught up in a spiritual body.

As for the location of the third heaven and of paradise, different views came to light. In the Gnostic Apocalypse paradise is left out, and the third heaven is one of ten. Irenaeus shares the traditional view that there are seven heavens, and appears to locate paradise in the third heaven. Clement’s cosmology is similar to the Gnostic view that there are higher spheres above the seventh heaven; he locates paradise above the third heaven. Origen seems not much interested in this question. In his allusions to Paul’s rapture he can easily omit paradise, sometimes he seems to distinguish between the third heaven and paradise, sometimes he locates it on the earth that is situated in heaven. The Catholic Apocalypse says that there are seven heavens and faithfully locates paradise in the third heaven, but Paul’s second visit to paradise has no reference to the third heaven.

The ineffable words revealed to Paul do not surface in the Gnostic Apocalypse, whereas according to some Church Fathers Gnostic groups pretended that these words were included in their secret knowledge, which implies that Paul did not fully keep silent about them. Clement and Tertullian contest the Gnostic claim and emphasize that no human being can know these words. Like these Gnostics, however, Origen thinks that Paul shared these revelations with some of his fellow workers, and that these words contain the Church’s unwritten teaching. In the fragmentary Mani Codex Mani does not pretend to know the words revealed to Paul. In the Catholic Apocalypse of Paul these words are limited to a special message Mani does not pretend to keep secret, but apart from this the apostle is instructed to make known on earth what he saw in heaven.

Finally we go into the hermeneutical question how far these respective texts and authors can be considered faithful to Paul’s reservation about such experiences. It is telling that we did not find any relationship between Paul’s rapture and his subsequent witness to the thorn in his